

Promoting Active Lifestyles Among Older Adults

“No one is too old to enjoy the benefits of regular physical activity.” U.S. Surgeon General, 1996¹

Successful aging is largely determined by individual lifestyle choices and not by genetic inheritance. Few factors contribute as much to successful aging as having a physically active lifestyle. Regular physical activity is important for the primary and secondary prevention of many chronic diseases (e.g., coronary heart disease, non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus, obesity), disabling conditions (e.g., osteoporosis, arthritis), and chronic disease risk factors (e.g., high blood pressure, high cholesterol).

- Regular physical activity substantially delays the onset of functional limitations and loss of independence. It has been reported that inactive, nonsmoking women at age 65 have 12.7 years of active life expectancy, compared with 18.4 years for highly active, nonsmoking women.²
- The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends regular physical activity, especially balance exercises, for the prevention of falls. One study reported a 58% reduction in falls among older women who began an exercise program.³
- The American Academy of Rheumatologists recommends physical activity in the management of arthritis. One study reported that regular walking reduced pain and improved function among people with arthritis in their knees.⁴
- Evidence suggests regular physical activity can improve the quality of sleep among older adults.⁵
- Physical activity often reduces the symptoms of depression. One study found strength training was as effective as medication in reducing depressive symptoms among older adults.⁶
- A recent study suggests that physical activity may help older adults reduce the amount of cognitive decline they experience as they age.⁷

Substantial health benefits occur with a moderate amount of activity (e.g., at least 30 minutes of brisk walking) on most, if not all, days of the week. Additional health benefits can be gained through greater amounts of physical activity, but even small amounts of physical activity are healthier than a sedentary lifestyle.¹ Yet, few older adults achieve the minimum recommended 30 minutes of moderate activity on 5 or more days of the week.

- CDC surveillance data show that about 28%–34% of adults aged 65–74 and 35%–44% of adults aged 75 or older are inactive, meaning they engage in no leisure-time physical activity (Figure 1). About 30%–40% of older adults are insufficiently active, and only about 25%–35% of older adults achieve the recommended activity level.
- The reduction in medical costs associated with physical activity increases with age, especially for women (Figure 2).⁸

Figure 1. Physical Inactivity for U.S. Men and Women, 2000

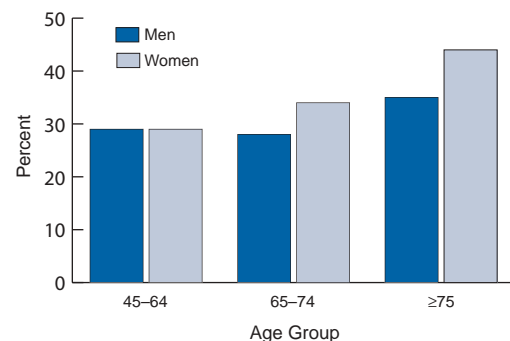
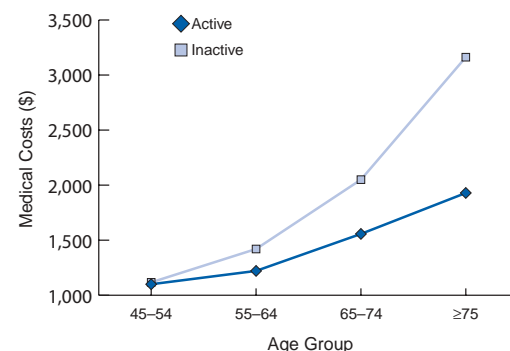


Figure 2. Annual Medical Costs of Active and Inactive Women (aged 45 or older) Without Physical Limitations



A Call to Action

Promoting physical activity among older adults is a national public health priority. A large preventable burden of morbidity, mortality, disability, and health care costs currently exists, and the number of older adults is projected to increase from 13% in 2000 to 20% in the year 2030. These data, in part, led 50 organizations, including CDC, to create the *National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults Age 50 and Older*. The *Blueprint* includes 60 specific recommendations for a collaborative approach to achieving the public health goal of a more physically active older population.

Blueprint Strategies Being Pursued by CDC

(Italic numbers correspond to Blueprint Objectives)

Cross-Cutting Strategies

- Supporting a comprehensive review of the health benefits of physical activity among older adults. (1)
- Supporting the development of a guide or manual on a home-based strength-training program. (3)

Policy/Advocacy Strategies

- Supporting research to determine what features of our environment encourage an active lifestyle for people of all ages, including older adults. (7, 9)

Medical Systems Strategies

- Supporting policy research to determine whether physical activity among older adults is increased when health plans cover the costs of membership at health and fitness facilities. (5)
- Developing more extensive physical activity recommendations and guidelines for older adults. (3)
- Collaborating with partners on projects that seek to increase physician counseling for physical activity among older adults. (1, 8, 12)

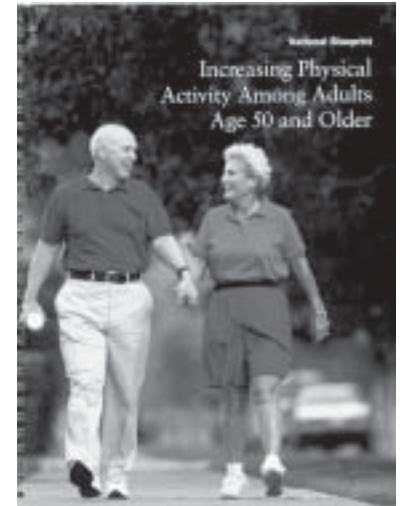


Photo provided by courtesy of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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